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Libby cleanup workers get pay cut as EPA tries to control costs

Hourly wage of \$24 cut to \$14, workers on project were told late last month

HELENA (AP) — Workers removing asbestos from contaminated homes as part of the Superfund cleanup of Libby have had their wages cut by more than 40 percent as the federal government tries to stretch its money for the cleanup project.

Workers were informed late last month that their hourly wage of \$24 was being cut to \$14. The Environmental Protection Agency's project manager in Libby, Jim Christiansen, said efforts are underway to try to restore some of the pay.

"The workers are very upset and if I was them, I would be, too," Christiansen said Monday. "We've been working really hard in the last couple of weeks to get this turned around."

Reasons for the wage reduction were twofold, Christiansen said. First, officials sought to hire more workers and clean up more homes and business with the same amount of money. Second, he said, the duties for cleanup workers changed from officially designated "heavy construction" to work more accurately defined as "residential construction."

Christiansen said there were about 30 to 40 cleanup workers affected by the change. They learned of the cuts just one day before they took effect.

Libby is the site of a former W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mine. Vermiculite ore was used to produce insulation and other products. However, the ore contained harmful tremolite asbestos and has been blamed for hundreds of illnesses and at

least 200 deaths in the Libby area. The mine operated from 1963 to 1990.

The EPA began its investigation in 1999 after news reports first linked health problems to the vermiculite mine. Cleanup work began in April 2000 and Libby was declared a federal Superfund site in 2002. Part of the cleanup plan includes removing tainted insulation from homes and business in the Libby area.

Christiansen said the Libby cleanup project always has been tight on money, but even tighter this year.

Gayla Benefield, president of the Lincoln County Asbestos Victims Relief Organization, said the pay cut is unacceptable.

"This is really discouraging for the No. 1 priority of the EPA to allow this to happen," she said. "It all comes down on the back of the working man in Montana."

The U.S. Department of Labor is doing a wage assessment to see what fair pay for the current cleanup work should be, Christiansen said.

He said he hopes the wage and be increased to \$19.55 an hour.